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INTERGOVERNMENTAL NEGOTIATING COMMITTEE FOR THE ELABORATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION IN THOSE COUNTRIES EXPERIENCING SERIOUS DROUGHT AND/OR DESERTIFICATION, PARTICULARLY IN AFRICA
Ninth session
3-13 September 1996
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*

SPECIAL ACTION

Letter dated 14 February 1996 from the Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Chairman of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa

I have the honour to forward herewith a letter dated 13 February 1996 addressed to you by Mr. Victor Danylov-Danilyan, Minister of Protection of the Environment and Natural Resources of the Russian Federation (annex I), on a draft project for the creation of a European desertification centre in the Republic of Kalmykia (annex II).

I would be grateful if the attached could be circulated as an official document of the Committee.

(Signed) Alexandre ORLOV
Deputy Permanent Representative

* A/AC.241/53.

ANNEX I

Letter dated 13 February 1996 from the Minister of Protection of the Environment and Natural Resources of the Russian Federation to the Chairman of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa

As is well known, individual regions of the Russian Federation situated within the country's European part are subject to the processes of desertification. These regions also include the territory of the Republic of Kalmykia, where these processes are being aggravated by climatic conditions.

The tense ecological situation that has come about in this region, which is the most drought-stricken in the European part of the Russian Federation, is cause for concern and makes it necessary to seek ways to solve the problem.

In this connection, we propose that consideration should be given to the possibility of establishing in the Republic of Kalmykia a European Arid Land Centre with the assistance of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO), the Economic Commission for Europe and the United Nations. The corresponding draft project was transmitted to you by the Minister of Protection of the Environment and Natural Resources of the Republic of Kalmykia, E. Gabunshchina.

(Signed) Victor DANYLOV-DANILYAN
Minister of Protection of
the Environment and Natural Resources
of the Russian Federation

ANNEX II

Draft project

The overall land area in the Russian Federation subject to desertification or potentially at risk amounts to approximately 50 million hectares. This pertains to the Volga, Ciscaucasian, Transbaikal and other regions of the Russian Federation.

There is a particularly serious situation in the south: in the Volgograd, Rostov and Astrakhan regions, the Stavropol territory and the Republic of Dagestan. Recently, there have been signs of a persistent risk of desertification in the Voronezh, Saratov, Orenburg and Omsk districts and the Republic of Buryatiya.

But, perhaps the most tense situation is in the Republic of Kalmykia, which is the most arid region of the European part of the Russian Federation and is second only to the deserts of Central Asia in terms of aridity.

In 1993, the President of the Republic of Kalmykia, K. Ilyumzhinov, declared an ecological state of emergency owing to the rapid deterioration of the ecological situation in the territory of the Republic as a result of the increased impact in recent decades of the anthropogenic burden on the environment combined with the region's extreme natural conditions.

The processes of desertification have already encompassed more than 80 per cent of the Republic's territory, whereby 47 per cent of its area has reached a high or very high degree of desertification. The degradation of the once unique pasture lands in the black-earth areas has resulted in the formation in Kalmykia of the first anthropogenic desert in Europe, characterized by massive tracts of open, unstable sand. This constitutes a real threat not only at the level of the Republic and the Russian Federation, but also on a European scale.

During sandstorms, the massive sand tracts have been shifting from the black-earth areas far beyond the limits of the Republic, reaching the borders of Eastern European States. The regular dispersal of aerosol particles from the earth's surface has been reaching altitudes of more than 800 metres, polluting the living environment.

As is well known, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation did not have a structure similar to the noted Desert Institute in Ashgabad, which deals with questions relating to the coordination of desertification-control activities. The lack of a coordination centre inevitably affected the results of the work of elaborating a United Nations international convention to combat desertification in those countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, which does not reflect the situation with regard to desertification in the Russian Federation, although the scope of the convention, in accordance with its provisions, includes 100 million hectares of territory where approximately 20 per cent of the citizens of the Russian Federation live. This prompted the

Government of the Russian Federation to refrain for the time being from signing the convention.

In spite of the difficulties arising from insufficient financing and the general crisis affecting the Russian Federation, Kalmykia has acquired considerable experience in combating desertification.

The establishment of a European Arid Land Centre in Kalmykia - the most arid area in Europe - is one of the possible ways to solve the problem and avert these processes in the territories of Eastern European States. A further, no less important, argument in favour of establishing such a centre is the unique natural environment in Kalmykia, which has no equivalent in the world, for maintaining a steppe genetic pool - a world genetic data bank. A European Arid Land Centre will occupy a worthy place, based precisely in Kalmykia, as the most vulnerable region of Europe in terms of natural and anthropogenic desertification.

The basic prerequisites for establishing a European Arid Land Centre in Kalmykia are:

- The tense ecological situation in the Caspian Sea region of the Russian Federation and other European States as well as the concomitant need to avert speedily the consequences of drought and desertification on the European continent (Europe must not repeat the fate of Africa.);

- The lack of a coordinating body for combating desertification on the European continent;

- The lack of, or fragmentary state of, varied and integrated information for effectively preventing desertification in Europe;

- The situation concerning the movement of dust and salt from the territory of Kalmykia subject to desertification towards other European countries;

- Active participation by the Government of the Republic of Kalmykia and the Ministry of Protection of the Environment and Natural Resources of the Republic of Kalmykia in drafting, promoting and implementing the provisions of the convention on desertification in the Russian Federation and carrying out measures to halt desertification in the Republic;

- Realization of the danger of the movement of desert land towards Europe.

Long-term goals

1. Coordination of efforts to deal with problems affecting the arid regions of Europe in order to implement the provisions of international conventions on desertification, biodiversity, climate and so forth;

2. The collection, analysis and processing of relevant data and the exchange of information between the regions and States of Europe whose territories are subject to desertification;

3. The holding by the European Arid Land Centre of international scientific seminars for exchanging experience in desertification control and organizing the training of personnel of various levels who are specialists in restoring vegetation and in other fields; and also the holding of international activities and the preparation of publications on desertification;

4. The development and strengthening of national, subregional, regional and continental research bases in European countries subject to drought and/or desertification processes, with particular attention given to socio-economic research;

5. Conducting scientific theoretical and applied research and practical work within the framework of international projects relating to desertification control and drought prevention with the participation of relevant organizations, ministries, departments and Governments of European countries;

6. Establishment of a European ecological fund for promoting desertification control in countries experiencing drought and/or desertification;

7. Preparation of a project on the scientific basis for desertification and drought control in the European region, in which the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Spain, France and others might participate; development of the necessary regulatory and legal basis for effective work in European countries;

8. Encouraging desertification-control research programmes through national, subregional and international research institutes;

9. The organization, on the basis of the European Arid Land Centre, of a service for monitoring drought and desertification processes in European countries.